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Public housing, commodification, and rights to the city: The US and England compared

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, England has not experienced the radical neglect and demolition of public housing that *We Call These Projects Home* describes happening in the United States. The English social housing sector has declined in size, primarily by sales to sitting tenants, but it remains a significant part of the housing system. Nonetheless, in London, we find that the progressive commodification of housing has contributed to the dispersion and suburbanisation of the urban poor over the 2000s, as the city as a whole prospered. As well as some demolition of inner-city housing estates, the increasing use of subsidised private renting has played a central role in this. We argue that in England, the boundary and relationship between state and market is an essential foundation to an analysis of 'rights to the city'. This is because it both determines the actual proportion of housing allocated by market pricing (as opposed to rights or needs) and the spheres of decision where market logic (rather than claims to rights) prevails. Current changes to Housing Benefit exemplify the effects of privatisation on the socio-spatial organisation of the city.

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Introduction

We Call These Projects Home (*WCTPH*) is a sharp and forensic analysis of public housing policy in the United States in recent decades. The United Kingdom, and England within it, are often seen as the Western European welfare states whose recent direction in social and fiscal policy most closely mirrors the US. The first part of this paper summarises which parts of the critique of US housing policy could equally apply to English policies in recent decades. There are parallels, including the move from the direct supply of dwellings to poor households to personal rent subsidies, and demolition of public housing. There are notable differences: despite the selling-off of council housing, it remains an important part of the English housing system, and means-tested rent subsidies are available to all who are eligible. We examine the changes wrought by housing policy upon urban space in London in the past decade. Subsidised housing has become more suburban and more spread out. London's poverty rates have hardly changed in a decade, but the urban poor are more spatially dispersed. This is the first aim of our paper: to see how the cumulation of policies is altering the socio-spatial structure of cities.

Our other intention is to connect policy-making and 'rights to the city' to broad social forces, rather than seeing policies as only a sequence of disparate, tactical or political manoeuvres. There are different types of rights, and different foundations on which such rights might be claimed. However, the recognition of rights depends on there being a sphere where such claims have currency, whether in law or in expectations justified by practice. Hence, established debates about the boundaries between state and market remain pertinent. In so far as housing is a commodity allocated by market pricing, non-monetised claims to value-in or rights-to urban dwelling are weak or empty against economic logic. The classic literature on the commodification of housing and the shifting boundary between 'state' and 'market' offers a useful perspective to interpret the vicissitudes of housing policy in different countries, and such policy's bearing on 'rights to the city'. Changes introduced by the current UK government, which came to power in 2010, exemplify this perfectly. As in the US, as *WCTPH* describes, a large proportion of low-income households in London now rent from private landlords with the help of state subsidy, rather than living in public housing – the most significant extension of the commodification of housing in the past 10 years. By reducing the maximum subsidy payable, the new government's approach is almost certain to displace large numbers of existing low-income tenants from the high-rent, inner-urban parts of London to the suburbs and beyond. 'Rights' to a large part of the urban core will become very largely a matter of capacity to pay.

The direction of US and English housing policy

The collective authors of *We Call These Projects Home* present a pointed critique of the direction and results of public housing pol-

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icy in the United States (Cattell, Dodge, Kasdan, Nunn, & Sinha, 2010). We start by drawing out some of the central lines of argument, and assessing what similarities there are in recent English housing policy. The account given of the US in the past decade is one of neglect, disinvestment and shrinkage in a public housing sector that was already inadequate relative to need. Since 2000, federal capital funding has fallen, and metropolitan housing authorities have run deficits because of shortfalls in subsidies to their operating costs (Cattell et al., 2010, pp. 26–27, 52). *WCTPH* concludes that this demonstrates a failing political commitment to direct public provision of dwellings as a means of housing the poor. Preference and funding have instead gone to providing vouchers to subsidise rents paid by poor tenants to private landlords (Cattell et al., 2010, pp. 13–14). The physical decline of public housing and the belief that social ills on estates arise from the concentration of poverty therein have been used to justify the demolition of public housing in many cities (Cattell et al., 2010, pp. 15, 29). Demolition without replacement of public housing units has dispersed the one-time residents of these estates (Cattell et al., 2010, pp. 34–35). The authors suggest that these specific developments illustrate more general problems: firstly, the unequal status and resources of people of colour, and, secondly, the opacity of public institutions to scrutiny.

The time-line of public housing legislation appended to *WCTPH* shows some parallels between the US and UK, but also illustrates some long-standing differences. The apogee of post-war public rented, or "social", housing in the UK was much higher; it has lasted longer and waned less. Social housing in the UK is now roughly evenly split between "council housing" that is owned by city authorities, and homes let by not-for-profit housing associations, some of which own tens of thousands of dwellings spread across the country. These tenures are usually treated together because much of their housing stock was built with state subsidy, their rents and allocations are highly regulated, and the clientèle they serve is similar (Whitehead, 2007). Subject to a means-test, tenants may claim Housing Benefit (HB) to cover all or part of their rent. This benefit is also available to low-paid and non-working households in private tenancies. Unlike Section 8 vouchers, HB is not a limited good; it is available to all who meet the criteria.

For reasons that we will explore, the social rented sector has shrunk steadily since 1980. Nonetheless, in 2010, 19% of households in England lived in social rented housing, down from a peak of 31% in 1981. With this decline, the social sector came to house an increasing proportion of low-income households, but incomes disparities both across society and between tenures are smaller than the US. *WCPTH* reports that 56% of public housing tenants have 'extremely low' incomes (less than 30% of area median) and a further 17% have 'very' low incomes, below 50% (Cattell et al., 2010, p. 65). We do not have tenant incomes compared to area medians in England, but 16% of social tenants have incomes (before housing costs) below 50% of the UK median; the proportion below 30% is too small to be measured by surveys (Department of Work & Pensions, 2011, p. 53, Table 3.6b). The level of welfare benefits means that, to date, it would be almost impossible to have an income below 30% of area median. There are also historic and current ethnic politics of public housing, segregation and poverty in England (Henderson & Karn, 1987; Peach & Byron, 1993; Phillips, 2006), but the history, terms and terrain of conflict are very different to the US, and the national politics of social housing are not *ipso facto* racial. Overall, though English social housing has residualised, compared to US public housing it is a less marginal sector, and its tenants comprise a less marginalised and impoverished class.

With that background, we can ask whether over the 2000s, social housing in England was subject to the radical underinvestment and demolition seen in the US (from 1998, Scotland and Wales had devolved responsibility for housing, and have taken, on occasion, quite different paths). The Labour Party which governed over this period is the party most inclined to preserve the *status quo* in public housing. *A* policy that exemplifies this was the 'Decent Homes Programme', instituted in 2000. This sought to address a backlog of repairs (estimated at £19bn) and improve kitchens, bathrooms, and the thermal comfort of dwellings (National Audit Office, 2010, p. 12). At the start of the programme, 39% of social housing did not meet the prescribed standards; by April 2009, this had fallen to 14%, mostly because of publicly funded improvements works; such work was underway on some of those remaining unimproved (National Audit Office, 2010, p. 7). At the national level, in the 2000s, the charge that 'they run it down in order to knock it down' does not stand. However, the programme targets could, under some circumstances, be an element in local authorities' decisions to demolish social housing, and so we turn to demolitions next.

From 2000 to 2010, 125,000 social rented dwellings were demolished in England. Most of these had the object of reducing excess supply in regions of industrial decline in the North of England, where problems of vacancy and abandonment had manifested in the 1990s (Power & Mumford, 1999). However, estates were also being demolished in cities with an overall shortage of supply relative to need, in the pursuit of 'regeneration'. A version of deconcentration theory was part of public policy discourse during the 2000s; in England, its shibboleth was 'mixed communities', and mix-ing of people as well as tenures was sought. Academics, ourselves included, applied themselves to definitions, rationales and evidence (Bond, Sautkina, & Kearns, 2010; Cheshire, 2009, 2012). Central government endorsed a limited programme of 'mixed community' demonstration projects (Lupton & Fuller, 2009), encouraged by what appeared to be successful urban regeneration schemes in the US under the aegis of the HOPE VI programme (Berube, 2005; Lupton & Tunstall, 2008). These projects mainly involved demolition of existing social housing and building mixed-tenure developments on the land. Local authorities were also enacting 'mixed communities' schemes of their own. Whereas central government and academics were interested in the possible social or economic benefits of mixed communities, some local municipal authorities (with responsibility for housing and spatial planning in their area) were demolishing and redeveloping social housing estates for varying reasons. For example, they were being required to reduce the proportion of their social housing stock that failed the Decent Homes standard. Where renovation and improvement seemed technically or financially infeasible and the housing lay on land with high potential value, a decision to demolish and rebuild could be pragmatic. We present examples from London below, and later discuss the circumstances and logic that constituted pragmatism in such projects.

Nationally, in the 2000s, considerably more new social rented housing was built than was demolished. The prime reason for the continued net shrinking of the social housing sector was sales to sitting tenants under the 'Right-to-buy' (RTB) provisions instituted by the Thatcher government in the early 1980s. These gave council tenants the right to buy their home, after a period of tenancy, at a substantial discount from its open-market value. Tenant-purchasers were liable to pay back part of the discount if they sold on the dwelling in the years immediately following purchase, but otherwise their property rights are identical to those of other owners. It is a full transfer to private ownership. Although buyers often remain for some time – the median period was reported as 16 years, in 2003/04 (Wilcox, 2008, p. 8) – as they sell-up and move, the dwellings become wholly part of the private market. Although sales were not as rapid as in the 1980s, over the 2000s, 400,000 social rented dwellings in England were sold by the RTB.

This picture of a slow decline of social renting, from a large base, is not the same as the neglect and dismantling of an already mar-

ginalised sector that *WCTPH* describes in the US. If we are reading it right, Los Angeles reduced its public housing stock by nearly half in a single year, primarily by sales (Cattell et al., 2010, p. 37). As in the US, state-subsidised private renting increased as social renting declined. As recently as 1992, text books foresaw a future in which it "seems likely rented housing will eventually be provided almost entirely by local authorities and housing associations" (Harvey, 1992, pp. 286–287). In fact, the private rented sector doubled in size in England, serving both poor and non-poor households. However, unlike Section 8 vouchers, Housing Benefit for low-income private tenants is fiscally separate from the maintenance and building of social housing; local authorities are reimbursed by government for HB payments. Thus, in all, it is not so immediately apparent whether English policy has been inimical to 'rights to the city'. We now try to evaluate this in two ways: firstly, by looking at the changing spatial distribution of subsidised housing and the urban poor in London in the 2000s, and secondly, by drawing out the common thread of commodification in the policies we have described.

Housing and the city in London

Though not a typical English city, London is an interesting example by which to assess whether or not state-subsidised housing has secured 'rights to the city'. London is by far the largest city in England. After a long period of relative decline after World War II, it has from the late 1980s undergone rapid economic and population growth as a centre of professional services involved in the co-ordination of advanced capitalism (Beaverstock, Smith, & Taylor, 1999). It is the urban area where housing is most expensive and in demand; house prices and market rents rose early and fast in the 2000s housing boom, and, compared to other regions, have been resilient in the long recession from 2008. It is a city with high poverty rates that barely changed in the 2000s – around 28% after housing costs are considered, the highest of any region in the UK. The household population of London grew, and grew faster than the total dwelling stock (Whitehead & Travers, 2011) and poverty rates did not change (MacInnes, Parekh, & Kenway, 2011, p. 35). Waiting lists for social housing lengthened, the flow of new available social tenancies dwindled, and overcrowding rates in private rented housing doubled (Greater London Authority, 2009). Thus, in London, state intervention in housing is most decisive in countervailing a market-based distribution of the urban poor.

In this context, we investigate the combined effects of the policies described above on the location of housing for the poor using a straightforward distinction between "inner" and "outer" London. In many European countries and in the US, researchers have described the 'suburbanisation of poverty' (Kneebone & Garr, 2010) and the 'embourgeoisification' or 'gentrification' of the whole central city during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s (Butler & Robson, 2003; Hamnett, 2003; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2007; Ley, 1996). If the 2000s saw increasing demand for inner-urban living from both an expanding middle class and, in some districts, a super-rich class, then differences in trends in subsidised housing between inner and outer London should indicate whether the state has moderated this trend.

Our definition of London and its inner and outer parts are conventional in UK policy discussion and statistics. London – the defined region with, in recent years, an overarching government of limited powers – has 32 local authorities, known as boroughs. Each of these has some political independence under an elected council, and many own and manage many thousand social rented dwellings. Inner London is the minority of boroughs closest to the city centre. It includes areas of both remarkable wealth and highly concentrated poverty, but has a consistently metropolitan character. Outer London has unambiguously urban areas but also boroughs that more resemble small-town and suburban districts elsewhere in England.

Table 1 presents a summary of the changes to the social housing stock in inner and outer London from 2002 to 2009. Improvements in the availability and detail of data on the social housing stock in England over the 2000s contrast with the difficulties the authors of *WCTPH* report in getting hold of the data needed to hold public policy to account. That said, even by cross-referencing several sources, it has not been possible to produce a complete reconciliation of what happened to social housing in London in the past decade. There was clearly a net loss of social housing units across London, and that loss was more pronounced in Inner London.

This is not widespread demolition to echo the US experience. The greatest loss of social housing in London was by sales to sitting tenants. Although those dwellings changed tenure, there was no immediate change in occupant and no implicit immediate displacement. It is unfortunate that we have little up-to-date research on the fate of RTB dwellings, but that is because they ultimately become privately owned properties transacted on the open market: they may be let, or sold on. The losses to the stock that can definitely be attributed to demolition are around 5000 in Inner London, and 1000 in Outer London. There were 20,000 housing units lost to the stock over the period that we cannot definitely account for. Considering the sources, we think no more than half of these were demolitions. However, even if *all* the unattributed losses were due to demolition, the total number of demolitions of social housing would still be smaller than the additions to social housing. This is true of London as a whole, and of Inner and Outer London separately.

However, the net and London-wide figures conceal considerable variation at borough and neighbourhood level. Boroughs like Southwark (inner London), Barking and Sutton (both outer London) lost around 10% of their social housing stock over the 2000s. Others, such as Brent, Croydon and Hillingdon – some of the more economically deprived parts of outer London – had a net gain of social housing stock. We do not have direct report data on neighbourhood-level demolitions, but our analysis of local tax lists suggests that demolition was most intense in the poorest neighbourhoods in inner London.

For example: in Canning Town, in Newham, East London, a long-term regeneration project has involved the gradual demolition of poor-quality council housing. The area has very high deprivation indicators, but since 2000 has also had fast transport links to the major financial districts. All of the units of public housing are intended to be replaced in mixed-tenure housing blocks that also include dwellings for open-market and subsidised sale. The tenure mix is to be achieved by rebuilding at higher density, unlike the US examples of demolishing public housing and rebuilding at lower density with few or no public housing units (Cattell et al., 2010, pp. 35–37). All existing residents who had to leave housing scheduled for demolition were offered the 'right-to-return' to newly built dwellings. The 2008 banking crisis and the subsequent recession has delayed the building, including the re-provision of demolished social housing. Alongside these housing changes, Canning Town received state capital investment in, for example, further transport improvements, integrating the neighbourhoods within London as a productive space. Similarly, on the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark in inner South London, a tenure mix was sought after demolition of social housing as part of a 10-year regeneration project. This meant that most social housing units would be replaced on site.

However, not far from the Aylesbury Estate is a reminder that not all regeneration schemes have guaranteed the rights of existing residents to be re-housed on the same site. The Heygate Estate, also in Southwark, occupied a site that has become 'prime' and attrac-

Table 1
Components of change in social housing stock in London 2002–2010, dwelling units (thousands). *Sources*: Authors' calculations from the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA), Business Planning Statistical Appendix (BPSA), DCLG, Housing Live Tables (Tables 115, 116, 648, 1005), The Regulatory and Statistical Return (RSR).

	Inner London	Outer London	London Total
Social Housing Stock 2002	**486**	**332**	**819**
Known demolitions	−5	−1	−6
Known sales to tenants	−32	−17	−49
New construction	+25	+25	+49
Unaccounted change	−11	−9	−20
Social Housing Stock 2010[a]	**463**	**329**	**793**
Net change in social housing 2002–2010	−23	−3	−26
Net change as a% of 2002 stock	*−4.9*	*−0.9*	*−3.2*
Maximum demolitions (known demolitions + unaccounted change)	−16	−10	−26

[a] Figures may not sum exactly due to rounding.

Table 2
Numbers of households and dwellings with public subsidy in Inner, Outer and all of London, 2002 and 2010 (thousands). *Sources:* Authors' calculations and estimates from the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA); Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Statistics, DWP; 2008-based Household Projections, DCLG.

		Inner London	Outer London	London Total
2002	Social housing units	486	332	819
	Private tenants with HB (estimated)	41	61	102
	Total households	1257	1816	3074
	% of all households in subsidised housing	42	22	30
	% of all subsidised households within London	57	43	100
2010	Social housing units	463	329	793
	Private tenants with HB	97	154	251
	Total households	1370	1937	3306
	% of all households in subsidised housing	41	25	32
	% of all subsidised households within London	54	46	100

tive, within walking distance of the City and well served by public transport. The social housing units demolished at Heygate were not replaced on site; the new developments there are predominantly open-market, high-price, high-density housing. Tenants were relocated to new homes built in the surrounding area. In 2002, Southwark had around 61,000 social rented dwellings, 55% of the household population; in 2010, it had 55,000, 43% of local households.

The most consequential change in the provision of housing to urban poor was perhaps not the fate of public housing – London retained more, compared to other cities – but the growth of private renting and of subsidies to low-income private tenants. Table 2 shows this expansion from 2002 to 2010. The top half of the table shows the position in 2002; the number of social rented dwellings, then the number of tenants of private landlords that receive state help through Housing Benefit. Across London as a whole, whilst the number of social housing units fell slightly, the number of household renting from private landlords with public subsidy expanded greatly, from around 100,000 in 2002 to over a quarter of a million in 2010. Social tenants still, in 2010, outnumbered subsidised private tenants, and in Inner London they did so greatly. However, the net loss of units and low turnover and scarcity of re-lets in social housing mean that private renting has been very important in meeting newly arising need, and in attempts to reduce homelessness.

It is apparent that mechanisms described have produced changes in the spatial distribution of low-income households in London. Between 2002 and 2010, the proportion of all households in subsidised housing fell slightly in inner London (from 42% to 41%) and rose in Outer London, from 22% to 25%. By 2010, Inner London housed 54% of all London households who received subsidy, a slight fall. The location of subsidised households is a good, but not perfect, proxy for the location of the poor, but other analyses of deprivation rates in London show consonant trends (Leeser, 2011). In Southwark, as in other inner boroughs like Camden, Tower Hamlets and Islington, estimated income deprivation rates fell substantially during the 2000s, although parts of these districts are still highly deprived relative to England as a whole. The change over the period is not radical. Nonetheless, as facts in themselves, these findings are consistent with theoretical expectations of 'gentrification' of the inner city and the suburbanisation of poverty.

We can be less definitive about the specific mechanics of this change, and in particular, whether the more loaded term 'displacement' applies. Small-area housing data and population estimates give some indications. In Inner London there was clearly rapid growth in the total non-poor population, and increasing residential density: 'dilution', perhaps. Neighbourhoods that had the highest deprivation rates in 2001 were subject to the greatest increases in numbers of people and dwellings (Fenton, 2012). In other words, capital investment was greatest in the poorest central neighbourhoods, implying an intensification of urban living. For Outer London, the change in deprivation rates might be explained by changes in the circumstances of resident residents, or to the migration of poor households outwards from Inner London in response to the unavailability of housing there. Demographic changes (for example, increasing numbers of children) suggest at least some role for the latter.

The question of displacement from redeveloped estates depends on an assessment of whether moves were 'forced' or not, and more broadly, the extent to which state bodies override the wishes of tenants in order to effect regeneration. It is customary for authorities to perform a consultation on their proposals, and to offer alternative subsidised housing within the borough. Whether there is a 'right-to-return', and the terms of any such right, vary from project to project. This part of the balance-sheet of large-scale housing renewal is largely unevaluated. The subsequent location and circumstances of tenants who are required to move is rarely systematically tracked, and almost never reported.

Local evaluations may track measures of satisfaction during the process of regeneration, but dissenting views of tenants are scarce in official reports, and lost in the ephemera of pamphlets, meetings and local media. We commend the authors of *WCTPH* for recording the voices of tenants of public housing. One possible approach might be look at records of legal processes undertaken to enable redevelopment, as in Desmond's compelling study of eviction in Milwaukee (Desmond, 2012). However, legal records cover only a small part of the decisions in redevelopment areas, and, more importantly, do not reflect the meaning of those decisions by tenants who, seeing in the running-down of their estate and the emptying of properties the signs of a *fait accompli*, decide to take voluntary relocation on the terms they are offered. Conversely, it would be mistaken to see all moves from estates and from Inner London as 'forced'; one could see the movement of poor households away from the inner city as fulfilling a longstanding pattern of outwards migration associated with the life-course. Hence, though our empirical findings of the gradual suburbanisation of subsidised housing, and the dispersion of the urban poor are suggestive, some reflection on rights is needed.

Discussion: Public housing and rights to the city

We acknowledge that 'rights to the city' encompass a multiplicity of claims and meanings, and we leave it to other papers in this collection to review the current state of the literature. Read from an English perspective, parts of *WCTPH* primarily concern basic housing rights: the demand that an affluent society should guarantee a minimally decent standard of affordable housing to its members. The study is also effective in bringing out the conflict over other rights: rights to security, and to participation and determination. What we have sought to do, albeit crudely, is to draw out what housing policy has meant for the socio-spatial organisation of the city; who is enabled to live where, and with what security and certainty.

One method is to trace specific policies and interventions, and judge each in turn as to whether it has sustained or undermined rights to the city. Another is to consider what the policies have in common, and how they circumscribe the field in which claims of 'rights' to the city have currency. The venerable literature on the 'commodification' of housing offers a useful perspective. In the 1970s and early 1980s, writers addressed the tension between urban housing as a form of collective consumption, organised by need, and the capitalist imperative to open housing as a commodity to exchange and accumulation (Harloe, 1981; Lojkine, 1976). One should beware of using commodification as a economically deterministic explanation of the development of welfare states and urban housing systems (Forrest & Williams, 1984). Still, the question of state/market boundaries is a continuing interest (Hills, 2011), even if current research is less connected to a general sociology. Among various welfare sectors examined (health, education, income maintenance), studies find that housing in England had the most pronounced and continuing shift away from 'pure public' (that is, funded, provided and decided by the state) to either wholly private provision, or supply where provision and decision are private (Edmiston, 2011, pp. 10–11).

The extent of market organisation of housing bears on both the actual spatial distribution of poor households within the city, and on modes of reasoning about land and housing decisions. In London, there is less social housing in the inner city, and the needs of poor households are increasingly met by private provision where price is closely tied to location. The result has been that, as the inner city became newly desirable to better-off and wealthy households, subsidised housing and the low-income households it provides for have shifted to the suburbs, and become more dispersed and less visible. Where one lives is determined by what one can pay; rights are neither here nor there. To all participants, the market and the commodity character of housing is transparent and ineluctable.

What seems clear is that in both the US and the UK we are now in what Smith (2002), following Hackworth and Smith (2001) describes as the 'anchoring' phase of gentrification; that is, when it has moved beyond the sporadic and local to become 'entwined with wider processes of urban and economic restructuring' (p440). Given this, 'commodification' also helps make sense of the demolitions, transactions in land and the decisions of local authorities that we have described. Objectively, decisions to redevelop estates on 'high-value' land open up previously closed spaces to capital investment and accumulation. Equally significant are the constraints and incentives that determine the rationality of pragmatic decisions on dealing with dilapidated public housing. There were, of course, sometimes engineering limits to the renovation of failing system-built housing. Other constraints were fiscal, and the reasoning becomes thus a question of what is 'economical' or 'best-value'. We note that: public funds were, in the view of some local authorities, insufficient to renovate more dilapidated estates or rebuild them as public housing; the conditions that central government attached to funds for Decent Homes were a 'means to lever local authority housing stock out of direct local authority control, or even ownership' (House of Commons, 2004, para. 125); authorities saw the land upon which public housing stood as an 'asset', and they were permitted to dispose of such assets to private developers at the best possible price; that central government supplied technical assistance from private consultancies to assist in such disposals and public–private partnerships. So, for local authorities who had concentrations of run-down housing on land with high potential value, demolishing and rebuilding as mixed-tenure housing was a pragmatic decision. This does not imply bad faith among officials genuinely seeking the regeneration of highly deprived urban communities: "thus even seemingly progressive planners and local councillors from Bochum to Brixton, who still think of themselves as socialists and who may be keenly aware of the dangers of displacement, have become captured by the bureaucratic promise of "regeneration" to such an extent that the integral agenda of widespread gentrification of urban centers is largely invisible" (Smith, 2002, p. 445f).

In closing, we are uncertain of the comparisons to be drawn between England and the threats to public housing in the US set out so plainly in *WCTPH*. The report portrays a rapid and radical attack upon a system of housing provision that was already marginal and marginalised. There are some common trends in policy, such as the move to personal subsidies for open-market renting. It means that the socio-spatial organisation of the city is more decisively determined by market pricing, as well as diminishing security and determination for low-income tenants. Nonetheless, the background is widely different. Despite a gradual (and not especially fast) extension of the market's reach in housing, the state's embroilment in housing in England remains wide, and with it the discursive and political space within which claims to 'rights to the city' might be recognised.

Nonetheless, we appear to be at a political moment where an intensification and extension of the commodification of housing in England is underway; there are notable similarities between the concerns of analysts in the early 1980s and those writing now. Current changes imply both a real rearrangement of the spatial order of cities, and a diminution of the sphere in which claims to 'rights' are meaningful. Since coming to power in May 2010, the Conservative-Liberal coalition government has made changes to the housing and welfare systems. The prime minister, David Cameron, has promised to 'reinvigorate' the Right-to-buy by increasing the discounts on the sale price to tenants (Wellman, 2012); these

had fallen in recent years, much slowing the rate of sales. In social housing, grant funding to public housing has been cut; instead, social landlords are expected to fund construction by increasing their rents towards market prices on some of their existing and new stock as it is let. The expectation is that social housing should be only an expedient. Its allocation should be efficient, both in time (tenure should be temporary, until the social tenants can 'achieve' home-ownership), in internal space (tenants should live in properties no larger than minimally inadequate to their needs), and in urban space (that social landlords should consider disposing of properties in expensive areas, and re-providing elsewhere) (Morton, 2012).

Publicly-funded but privately-provided housing to low-income households expanded in the 2000s, and policy changes which are taking effect at the time of writing offer a powerful example of the interplay of state, market and rights to the city. Rising rents and more claimants have greatly increased the cost of Housing Benefit in the 2000s, and it was thus an obvious target for a government intent on reducing public spending. One of the first steps taken was to reduce the maximum rent the state would meet, in relation to prevailing local rents. Where formerly Housing Benefit would pay up to the median average of local private rents for a given property size, it will now pay only up to the 30th percentile. The measures affect existing claimants, many of whom will be left with large shortfalls between their rent and the amount they receive to meet it. It will undoubtedly increase poverty and arrears, and for many tenants – especially larger households – there will be no choice but to move. This is likely to have major consequences in London, since the gap between private rents in expensive (inner, and/or affluent) neighbourhoods and cheap (peripheral, and/or deprived) neighbourhoods is much greater than in Britain's other cities. A projection suggests that the cumulative effects will mean that almost all of inner London north of the river Thames will be largely unaffordable to poor households seeking private rented housing (Fenton, 2011; see also Hamnett, 2010). In what was both politically astute and a neat example of the application of market logic to the spatial organisation of cities, maximum welfare benefits were set to the average household income, the logic being that recipients should not rent where 'average working families' could not afford. Here we see the circular nature of commodification and its effects on claims of rights: first the provision of housing to low-income households is opened up to private profit; this in turn legitimates the application of market logic to the rules by which that provision is organised, and the setting of those rules such that poor households are displaced from the city.

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